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PLAYING THE GAME OF FASHION IN THE DIGITAL ERA:
The Dynamic Relationship Between Consumers and Algorithms

Master's Thesis
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Abstract

Existing literature on algorithms has predominately focused on how brands can use algorithms to their advantage. Thus, it has neglected understanding the phenomenon of consumer-algorithm relationships. This research aimed to fill this gap in the existing literature by studying fashion consumers' interactions with Instagram's algorithm. As a highly competitive consumption activity, fashion was a fruitful focus for the study, and Instagram, being recognized as an influential fashion space, provided a proper context through which to research the phenomenon. The study was led by the following research question: How do fashion consumers interact with algorithms?

The study was conducted through qualitative, phenomenological research. Data was collected through eleven semi-structured interviews, and the informants were chosen based on their knowledge as fashion consumers and their activity as users of Instagram. To support the interviews, each participant was asked to share their screen and demonstrate how they use Instagram. Through the analysis, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of fashion capital was used to ground the findings.

The results enhance the current understanding of algorithm interactions by showing that fashion consumers are acutely aware of Instagram's algorithm. Furthermore, consumers can effectively influence the algorithm, enabling it to perform as a consumption tool. For some fashion consumers, the algorithm is used as a strategic tool for fashion field maneuvering. By enacting various interaction strategies, these consumers train it to curate new forms of capital. However, other consumers use algorithmic misalignments such as repetitive, pushy content to identify and abandon devalued fashion.

The findings challenge existing literature by showing that many consumers do not want to participate in the constant upkeep of training algorithms. Finally, this study adds to the existing research on targeted recommendations by showing that while fashion consumers use the algorithm as a tool in their consumption process, their activity on Instagram is not exclusive to fashion. Therefore, making it difficult for the algorithm to mirror the fashion field and influence consumption accurately.

Keywords Algorithm, Instagram, Fashion Consumption, Fields of Fashion, Cultural Capital, Social Capital, Recommendation Systems

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1. Introduction

We live in a world increasingly driven by algorithms. From a quick google search or passive scroll on social media to accessing a bank account, you guessed it; an algorithm is involved (Dourish, 2016). At its most basic form, an algorithm is a set of instructions designed to perform a specific task. Though dating back thousands of years, algorithms have only recently gained common recognition (Chabert,1999). This recognition comes hand in hand with the rise of digitization and social media platforms, on which algorithms enable users to navigate endless streams of content by tailoring recommendations to their interests (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020). As social media continues to become central to our lives, it is no surprise that academics have become particularly interested in the algorithms which govern each platform (Dourish, 2016).

In consumer studies, academics have celebrated algorithms, arguing that an increased ability to target consumers will result in higher recognition and sales (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020; Tang et al., 2018). This argument has widely been accepted as an essential benefit of algorithms, with ample literature exploring the strategic ways brands and influencers can use them to their advantage (Cotter, 2018). Notable studies have discussed the creation of algorithmic culture, algorithmic brand culture, and the ethical concerns of shared data (Carah and Angus, 2018; Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020; Sands et al., 2020). Scholarship has also recently begun to explore how consumers interact with algorithmic recommendations, though knowledge is limited as studies have predominately focused on the consumption of news and advertising (Shin, 2019; Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020). We know that users find algorithms helpful when they are correctly targeted and that trust plays a mediating role in interacting with media content (Shin, 2019). However, these interactions have been treated as reactions, asserting that users lack the awareness and ability to influence the algorithm in a meaningful way (Shin, 2019; Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020).

Activist Eli Pariser once said, “the algorithms that orchestrate our ads are starting to orchestrate our lives” (Pariser, 2011). While the impact algorithms have on our lives cannot be denied, who’s to say that consumers don’t impact algorithms as well? Academic research has devoted considerable attention to how algorithms function and the most effective ways businesses can utilize them. However, the relationship between consumers and algorithms is a phenomenon that

has been largely overlooked. Therefore, this study asks the question: How do fashion consumers interact with algorithms?

Expanding on the research question, I'm interested in the algorithmic perceptions and interactions of consumers who are highly knowledgeable of their consumption field. Fashion was chosen because it is a competitive field highly governed by social media algorithms. In fact, it's safe to assume that algorithms influence everything from our choice of undergarments to the new it-bag that sold out before ever hitting the shelves (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). Like Rocamora (2002), I recognize fashion consumers as players in the game of fashion, acquiring knowledge through various forms of capital and competing for the most iconic style. Like any game, fashion needs a playing field, and social media provides the perfect space (Mcquarrie et al., 2013). Consequently, fashion consumption is strongly tied to algorithms and a fascinating field to study the phenomenon.

The text will first discuss the theoretical background of the thesis, which concentrates on previous marketing theory related to algorithms and illustrates how the literature lacks an understanding of consumer interactions. Following the background, the methodology is shared by explaining the study's context, research design, and data analysis process. Next, the findings are presented in the fourth section, followed by a discussion in light of the existing theory and the implications of the study. Finally, the thesis will conclude with the research limitations, directions for future research, and an overview of the key findings.

2. Theoretical Background

Existing literature on algorithms has overwhelmingly asserted the view that algorithms are somewhat of a holy grail for marketers; build the algorithm, and it will successfully target customers. Ample studies have, for example, explored the benefits of algorithms, best practices for using them, and even the lengths content creators go to hack them (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020; Tang et al., 2018; Cotter, 2018). However, there is less research into the relationship between consumers and algorithms. Consequently, this research aims to broaden the understanding of how consumers interact with algorithms.

2. 1 Algorithms and Marketing

Since the creation of digital media, algorithms have played an increasingly central role in marketing. Algorithms have been heralded for their ability to utilize customer data quickly and craft customized recommendations in real-time (Dourish, 2016). Media platforms and brands like Amazon, Google, and Facebook exist as pillars of algorithmic success, constantly updating their machine-learning technologies to classify, simulate, and target consumers in increasingly fine-tuned ways (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). Personal recommendation systems, or algorithms, are valued for allowing consumers to navigate vast amounts of information tailored to their interests (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020). For marketers, data-driven, targeted recommendations are expected to reduce wasted ad spend and increase financial returns (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020). In addition to these features is the added audience labor that takes place in digital media environments. With traditional media, audience labor was limited to the act of watching advertisements (Dallas, 1977). However, on digital media platforms, the audience also does the work of being monitored, producing content, and allowing their actions to be quantified into data that brands can exploit (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). While this concept of added audience labor can be seen as a benefit to marketers, not all consumers share the positive outlook, which is expounded on later.

Beyond the aforementioned benefits, previous literature has explored the interdependent and recursive nature of consumer participation on digital media platforms (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). This research builds on the notion of 'algorithmic cultures,' which can be defined as the tendency to delegate the work of culture – the sorting, classifying, and hierarchizing of individuals – to computational systems (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). It draws attention to how data-driven ordering of content on algorithmic platforms enables or restricts encounters with pop culture (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). Essentially, algorithms act as organizers of cultural life.

In response to the significant role algorithms play in today's society, scholarship has brought attention to the software designer's role. Through their study on the Netflix Prize contest, Hallinan and Striphas (2016) found that algorithmic culture is influenced by the bias of technical engineers. Though the contest was advertised as a technical challenge to improve the Netflix recommendation system, the participants found that the task was heavily interpretive, requiring them to determine the significance of customer ratings (Hallinan and Striphas, 2016). Therefore, whether intentionally or not, each engineer's unique worldview became embedded into their algorithm design, and consequently, they became arbiters of culture (Hallinan and Striphas, 2016; Beck, 2016). Their findings were further supported by Klinger and Svensson (2018), who claimed that social media algorithms are "guided by the authors' selection of information that is of personal interest to them." While these studies acknowledged and challenged the engineer's role in shaping culture, they did not address the consumers' role.

Research on algorithmic culture has also begun to explore the relationship between the algorithmic circulation of content and the dynamic nature of user participation. Notably, this relationship has been documented through the efforts of influencers on digital platforms. As Cotter (2018) discovered, influencers are acutely aware of algorithmic power. With their income depending on visibility, influencers learn hidden rules for platform success and formulate tactics accordingly (Cotter, 2018). Influencers pursue visibility as if playing a game and, in doing so, become active participants in the creation of algorithmic culture. Like Hallinan and Striphas' (2016) findings, the visibility game addresses algorithmic manipulation on the production side of social media but does not consider how consumers of media can influence the algorithm.

The concept of algorithmic culture becomes particularly relevant to marketing in algorithmic brand cultures, which Carah and Angus (2018) define as brand value created by managing the interplay between consumers' participatory actions and the data-processing power of digital media. It asserts that consumer activities double as data that brands can harness for commercial benefit (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). While this concept acknowledges the role of consumers, the literature focuses less on understanding their actions and more on the ways brands should operate in these environments (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). Furthermore, it suggests that brands should rely on the labor of audiences to train algorithms, recognizing consumers as programming devices (Carah and Angus, 2018). Along with the belief that audiences want to play the programmer's role, that suggestion requires their authentic and non-calculated participation. However, through Hearn's (2008) development of the 'branded self,' we know that consumers participate in a form of self-construction, projecting a version of themselves that blurs the lines of authentic media engagement. Therefore, data is collected for the users' branded self instead of their authentic self, rendering data-driven targeting less accurate. Though, that discussion is not the aim of this study. Instead, this study contends that just as media users have manipulated algorithms for visibility, consumers may employ tactics to alter algorithmic output for an improved platform experience.

2. 2 Algorithms and Consumers

The relationship between consumers and algorithms is complicated. On the one hand, there are valid ethical concerns regarding privacy and the data-driven construction of knowledge. Specifically, algorithms work by capturing consumer activity as input, processing it, and producing output in the form of targeted online experiences (Gilbert, 2018). By supplying the algorithm with more input, the output becomes increasingly personalized. This cycle creates a feedback loop through which people's interactions are determined and personalized digital worlds are constructed (Gilbert, 2018). The risk here is that as the algorithm gains intelligence, consumers are exposed to increasingly self-validating media, making it difficult to relate to others and creating polarized worlds (Gilbert, 2018). Regarding privacy, when studying the intimacy of surveillance within the consumer-corporate relationship, Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) found that consumers are fearful about how much information is collected and how it will be used. Furthermore, while the data-gathering itself may not bother consumers, data misuse through fraud or scams is particularly

fear-laden (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020). Users employ numerous strategies to minimize privacy risks on social media (Sands et al., 2020). Tactics include masking their identity, refusing to use a platform or service, refusing to provide personal information, and carefully monitoring the content they chose to share (Sands et al., 2020).

On the other hand, consumers want to be seen, known, and understood. When exploring these opposing views, Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) found that algorithmic surveillance is embraced when the outcome creates a superior experience. However, more often than not, the targeted recommendations seem to miss the mark. They noted that consumers are in favor of relevant recommendations, but many spoke to the irritation of being incorrectly categorized (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020). Furthermore, Shin (2020) discovered that consumers only perceive the algorithm as valuable when it produces accurate recommendations. Together, these studies found that while consumers may not be able to work against or design better algorithms, they strongly feel misread by the market (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020; Shin, 2020).

The concept of autonomy has also been a focus of algorithm studies. In their research on exogenous cognition, Smith et al. (2021) found that consumers readily opt for less burdensome forms of processing information, and therefore are happy to surrender their autonomy to smart devices. They also noted that it has traditionally been thought that consumers are ignorant of the influence of algorithms. However, through their research, it was questioned if a spectrum of awareness exists, which this study hopes to answer (Smith et al., 2021). In a different study on the sovereignty of algorithms, Reviglio and Agosti (2020) found that mainstream social media platforms deny consumers the possibility to participate in the algorithm's decision-making process. Moreover, because of the elusive nature of algorithms, most users cannot exercise their will when it comes to personalization (Reviglio and Agosti, 2020). They suggested that social media platforms have lost consumers' trust by limiting their role in personalization and to rebuild trust, platforms should provide more opportunities for consumers to directly influence their recommended content (Reviglio and Agosti, 2020). The concept of algorithmic trust was also discussed by Shin (2020), who suggested that transparency and accuracy can positively influence a consumers' level of trust in the system.

While existing literature has begun to explore consumer-algorithm relationships, it inadequately speaks to the role consumers play in shaping output (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). More aptly, it lacks a complete understanding of consumer perceptions of algorithms and whether or not consumers intentionally interact with them.

2. 3 Interacting With Algorithms

So, what does it mean to interact with algorithms intentionally? Intentional interactions are manipulations or any conscious interactions with an algorithm intended to affect the system's output (Cotter, 2018). While previous research in marketing has primarily taken the stance that consumers lack the acuity to affect algorithms in a meaningful way, evidence of consumer manipulation is present in other fields of study (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020).

Similarly to influencers, consumers also employ tactics to game algorithms for visibility. This phenomenon has been brought to light in the field of computer science, cautioning programmers that consumers can use algorithms to amplify arguments. In the months leading up to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, members of the subreddit r/the_donald learned how Reddit's sorting algorithm worked and were able to take advantage of nuances in the program, effectively making their content dominant on the platform (Shepherd, 2020). Many scholars present the view that algorithms are rhetorical: they influence human action. However, the Reddit example offers a meso-rhetorical view, showing that the human usage of algorithms is also rhetorical: humans influence algorithmic behavior. (Shepherd, 2020.)

Whereas users gamed Reddit's algorithm to amplify their arguments, applicants on digital labor platforms have tricked the algorithm to gain prioritization. Evidence of these practices has been studied in the fields of social policy and human relations, calling into question the ability of an algorithm versus a human to judge the value of human capital assets (Manish et al., 2020; Mckenzie, 2020). Digital labor platforms facilitate the connection between buyers and freelancers. Each platform allows the freelancer to create a portfolio of skills, accomplishments, and abilities. Based on their portfolio, the algorithm determines who is most suited for jobs and makes recommendations to buyers accordingly (Mckenzie, 2020). However, as Mckenzie (2020) discovered, the algorithms are far from perfect. In fact, these platforms prioritize users who have

collected many platform-specific badges or micro-assets over users who have advanced, real-life experiences (Mckenzie, 2020). Eager to be noticed, freelancers on labor platforms have learned to fill their profiles with assets the algorithm values. (Mckenzie, 2020).

Like freelancers taking advantage of labor platform algorithms, job applicants have learned how to excel on algorithmic assessment systems. These systems are used globally to screen job candidates, essentially replacing HR employees. Instead of judging a candidate based on their whole application, algorithmic systems analyze video interviews for body language and identify keywords on resume's as signifiers to predict a person's job performance (Manish et al., 2020). Among other tactics to trick the algorithm, candidates have learned to format their resumes in a way the system prefers and fill them with hidden keywords (Manish et al., 2020). While the algorithmic systems are created to assist in the assessment process, opportunities for users to exploit their nuances render the systems unreliable.

Consumer manipulation has also been a topic of interest in the tourism industry. Specifically, scholarship has explored the algorithmic production of authenticity. Travel review platforms use algorithms to sort through data and determine which tourism experiences are authentic (Nuenen, 2019). Algorithms are expected to produce reliable recommendations; however, their ability to judge each review's content is lacking. User-generated reviews are collected as data, meaning the algorithmic recommendations are based on the user's opinions (Nuenen, 2019). Therefore, the platforms are highly susceptible to users falsifying reviews to affect the algorithms rank of experiences (Nuenen, 2019).

Those examples serve as a small synthesis of the phenomenon studied outside of marketing. They explored consumers manipulating algorithms to gain visibility, prioritization, or affect platform ranking. This study, however, seeks to understand how consumers interact with algorithms within their consumption process. Additionally, positioning this study in the field of marketing broadens the current academic discussion.

2. 4 Algorithms and the Fashion Industry

A brief overview of algorithmic conversations in the fashion industry is helpful to further contextualize this study. Literature on the topic has primarily focused on visibility; particularly, how influencers game the algorithm, as Cotter (2018) presented. Though, platform visibility isn't only sought after by influencers. Brands have employed similar tactics to outsmart algorithms, and consequently, research on understanding algorithms is anything but limited (Cotter, 2018; Carah and Angus, 2018). Aside from the research on visibility, algorithms have been studied in reference to building brand communities and cultures, as previously discussed above (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). Fashion scholarship has also considered algorithms' abilities to assist in supply chain management, design, and other creative roles (Avery and Israeli, 2017; Mollard, 2021). Finally, academics have emphasized the relationship between authenticity and sales influence, guiding influencers and brands to produce the best content for their respective audiences (Pöyry et al., 2019; Driel and Dumitrica, 2020). Algorithms have become a notable topic of discussion within the fashion industry. However, research on how fashion consumers perceive, use, and affect algorithms has been majorly neglected.

2. 5 Summary and Research Position

As previously illustrated, literature has predominantly focused on how algorithms assist marketers in making brands more visible and valuable. Algorithms have been celebrated for their ability to classify, simulate, and target customers in increasingly fine-grained ways (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). Moreover, data-driven targeting is said to enable brands to more effectively reach customers and, consequently, increase financial returns (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020). The added audience labor on social media has also been discussed, noting how brands benefit from the vast amount of data collected on these platforms (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). Literature has also widely covered the concept of gaming the algorithm to reach a wider audience (Cotter, 2018). More aptly, it has explored the various tactics marketers employ to take advantage of algorithm nuances and the benefits of doing so (Cotter, 2018).

Scholarship has also discussed algorithmic cultures, drawing attention to how cultural life is organized through the data-driven ordering of content (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020). These

studies have also acknowledged the role software designers and influencers play, questioning whether, intentionally or not, they are participants in shaping culture (Hallinan and Striphas, 2016; Cotter, 2018). Algorithmic brand cultures have also been a focus of study, with literature discussing how brands can create value from managing the interplay between consumer actions and the data-processing power of digital media (Carah and Angus, 2018). Furthermore, it speaks of audience labor, asserting that brands should rely on consumers to effectively train the algorithm (Carah and Angus, 2018). However, while acknowledging the consumer's role, the literature does not seek to explain the consumer experience.

Concerning the relationship between consumers and algorithms, literature has explored the dichotomy between privacy concerns and the desire to be correctly targeted by algorithmic systems. Regarding privacy, the concept of feedback loops and the exposure to increasingly self-validating media has been discussed ad nauseam (Gilbert, 2018). Furthermore, consumers are fearful about how data is collected and used, expressing concerns about data misuse and fraud (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020). Despite these concerns, literature has shown that consumers want to be seen and understood, embracing algorithmic surveillance when it leads to an improved platform experience (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020; Shin, 2020). However, it has been noted that consumers feel strongly misread by the market, which causes significant irritation (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020).

Outside of marketing, literature has begun to explore the phenomenon of consumers intentionally interacting with algorithms. Notably, consumers have manipulated for visibility on Reddit, prioritization on labor platforms, and to affect rankings on travel review websites (Shepherd, 2020; Mckenzie, 2020; Manish et al., 2020; Nuenen, 2019). Despite documentation in other fields of study, marketing scholarship primarily takes the stance that consumers cannot effectively manipulate algorithms (Ruckenstein and Granroth, 2020). Consequently, the literature lacks an understanding of how consumers interact with algorithms.

This research addresses the gap, recognizing that users influence algorithms as much as algorithms influence users. Furthermore, because input affects output, there will always be an opportunity for manipulation. Cotter (2018) noted that if platform usage deviates from what engineers envisioned,

the resulting data may not be meaningfully interpreted, undermining the system's integrity. Hence, for marketers to successfully use social media, it is paramount for them to understand the relationship between consumers and algorithms.

3. Methodology

The research studies the phenomenon of consumer relationships with algorithms in the context of fashion consumers on Instagram. The study is qualitative and grounded in an interpretivist approach that seeks to draw commonalities through consumers' unique, subjective experiences (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Next, the study's context will be presented and followed by the epistemology, research design, and data analysis.

3. 1 Context of the Study

Intending to understand how consumers interact with algorithms, an analysis was conducted within the context of fashion consumers on Instagram. Instagram is one of the world's leading social networking services built around photo and video sharing. Users can share their own content and follow accounts they find interesting. Interactions may come in the form of following, liking, commenting, sharing, posting to one's feed, posting to one's story, or saving. When sharing content, users can choose to post to their story where it will remain visible for 24 hours or permanently to their profile. There are two primary feeds for viewing content: the Home feed and the Explore feed. The content from followed accounts will appear on the Home feed. At the top, users can view the stories posted by people they follow or, they can scroll down the feed to view recent posts. The Explore feed is where Instagram generates a collection of content from accounts users don't follow but may like. From the order of stories to what is shown on the Explore feed, all of the content has been selected by an algorithm that studies interactions and recommends content the consumer is most likely to enjoy.

Instagram has amassed over one billion users as of January 2021, of which 34.4% are women below the age of 34 (Barnhart, 2021). Instagram is also the preferred platform for following brands, with 90% of users following at least one brand and one-third of the most viewed stories coming from brands (Barnhart, 2021). Finally, Instagram has proven to play a valued role in the consumption process. A study conducted by Facebook found that 83% of respondents used Instagram to discover new products, 80% used it to decide whether to buy a product, and 46%

made a purchase directly after viewing a recommendation (Hearn, 2021). From these statistics, it is evident that Instagram is a crucial platform for consumers and a suitable context for this study.

As a photo-sharing application, Instagram is inherently an artistic platform, and as such, is the perfect space for fashion to be created and shared on a global scale (Crewe 2015). This element of seeing and being seen, along with hierarchies of cultural capital, boundaries of visibility, and the ability to form taste communities, are vital attributes that make Instagram a fashion space (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006; Mcquarrie et al. 2013). In addition to these attributes, brands and influencers have indicated a preference for it over other social platforms (Cotter 2018). Therefore, it is the platform where content producers expend the most effort, and manipulations acted out by consumers may carry the most significant impact. Lastly, the fashion industry is known for its constantly changing trends. Thus, those interested in fashion must learn to maneuver quickly from one style to the next (Rocamora, 2002). For these reasons, fashion consumers were seen as a valuable subject for studying how algorithms influence consumer behavior.

3. 2 Epistemology

The research was conducted through the epistemological paradigm of interpretivism, which seeks to understand perceived realities and uncover the lived experiences of individuals. The value of this research comes from revealing how an individual's experiences shape their perception of the world (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Therefore, it is understood that each consumer experiences a unique reality that influences their actions, or in this study, how they interpret and interact with algorithmic processes. As this research seeks understanding through a multitude of realities, it is impossible to manifest causality or form one single truth. Instead, the study applies phenomenology to understand how each individual connects to the whole (Thompson et al., 1989). With a phenomenological approach, the ultimate source of all meaning is derived from individual lived experiences of which commonalities can be formed (Thompson et al., 1989). As this research is intended to understand how each consumers' lived experiences impact their algorithmic interactions, a phenomenological approach to interpretivism was selected as a suitable research method.

3. 3 Research Design

3. 3. 1 The Interview

The data was collected by carrying out semi-structured interviews that were hosted face-to-face via Zoom. According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008), "with an interpretivist approach, the interview is considered a pathway to the participants' authentic experiences." That said, a semi-structured method was chosen because the flexible nature allows for the interview to be shaped around experiences brought forward by the participant while still maintaining a focus on relevant topics (Bariball & While, 1994).

An interview framework was developed prior to the interviews based on previously reviewed literature. This framework provided focus for the interview while also allowing room for the dialogue to change course as the interviewee brought up novel topics. The outline consisted of four key segments: background, consumption habits, fashion interest, and Instagram behavior. The first section was critical in understanding the respondents' background and establishing a relaxed environment (Arsel, 2017). The consumption and fashion segments were designed to gauge the individual's Cultural Capital in the field of fashion. Finally, the fourth segment focused on Instagram usage. This portion of the interview used an autodriving research technique where each interviewee was asked to share their Instagram (Heisley & Levy,1991). Autodriving has been shown to be specifically valuable for consumer research because it provides a perspective of action in which informants make their habits meaningful to outsiders (Heisley & Levy,1991). The Instagram display acted as elicitation material which helped the participants recall and articulate their experiences (Rook, 2006). Consequently, the show and tell proved to be a valuable source of identifying heuristics and hermeneutics, which are both a focus of interpretivist research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Though a range of question types was used, an emphasis was placed on open-ended questions that were easy to answer and would elicit a detailed response (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The questions were also formed in a way that would allow the participant to use their unique vocabulary. For example, I was careful not to mention the word "algorithm" unless the interviewee brought the word up themselves. In addition to thoughtful question construction, I responded using

the same language as the interviewee to avoid leading the conversation. Finally, probe questions were utilized to fully understand the respondent's unique experiences relating to the phenomenon (Arsel, 2017).

As previously mentioned, all of the interviews were hosted face-to-face via Zoom. While it is commonly beneficial in qualitative research to conduct in-person interviews, in light of Covid-19, an alternative method was necessary (Given, 2008). Zoom was selected as the best solution based on a 2019 study that found a majority of interview participants "identified Zoom as a preferred method compared to in-person interviews, telephone, or other videoconferencing platforms (Archibald et al., 2019). Among other attributes, Zoom was found to be user-friendly, time-effective, cost-effective, and helpful in establishing natural rapport in the comfort of one's home (Archibald et al., 2019; Arsel, 2017). In addition to these advantages, the screen-sharing ability was paramount, enabling the interviewee to share their Instagram habits effectively.

Before commencing the interview, a casual conversation took place to set a relaxed atmosphere (Arsel, 2017). During this time, an overview of the interview was presented with a general description of the research question. To prevent any leading, it was not until after each interview was completed that the goal of the research was shared.

3.3.2 Interviewees

A total of 11 interviews were conducted to gain a comprehensive data set. The respondents were recruited through direct messages and were all acquaintances of mine. Since it is crucial that interviewees be selected based on analytic merits, the study required that each met three criteria (Rapley, 2014). First, the individual needed a base of cultural capital within the field of fashion. So, each participant had both fashion-related education and professional experience in the fashion industry. Second, the interviewees were all women between the ages of 23-26 since, as previously explained in the context, this demographic makes up a key segment of consumers on Instagram. Finally, it was required that each respondent have an Instagram account on which they consider themselves to be active.

Each interview was recorded using Zoom's recording tool, and the duration spanned from 36 minutes to 65 minutes with an average time of 51 minutes. The first interview was held in October of 2020, and the remaining took place over the next four months ending in February of 2021. A summary of the participants can be found in Table 1. Permission was granted to use the participant's real names.

Table 1
Interviewees

Name	Age	Education	Place*	Date	Duration
Hallie	26	B.Sc. Journalism + Fashion Media	NYC	18-10-20	46min
Martina	23	M.Sc. Global Fashion Retailing**	London	29-10-20	47min
Jessica	26	B.F.A. Fashion Design	Ohio	30-10-20	36min
Emelia	24	B.Sc. Fashion Merchandising	NYC	3-11-20	41min
Lissa	26	B.F.A. Fashion Design	Georgia	12-12-20	53min
Kat	23	B.F.A. Fashion Design	NYC	14-12-20	58min
Maddie	24	B.Sc. Communications + Fashion Merchandising + Pop Culture	NYC	6-1-21	65min
Fanni	26	M.A. Fashion + Textiles**	Helsinki	14-2-21	56min
Irina	24	M.Sc. Marketing + Fashion Management **	Helsinki	28-1-21	54min
Mackenzie	24	B.Sc. Fashion Merchandising	NYC	28-1-21	46min
Halle	24	B.Sc. Fashion Merchandising	Ohio	5-2-21	50min

**All interviews were hosted and recorded via ZOOM due to Covid-19*
*** Degree in progress*

3. 4 Data Analysis

Directly following each interview, a verbatim transcript was created. The transcription process acted as the initial step in familiarizing with the data (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Next, the transcriptions were read several times to start to make sense of the phenomenon, and emergent codes were identified. I then wrote a narrative memo for each participant to deepen the preliminary understanding and help generate meaningful ideas from the data (Roulston, 2014). These memos were written similarly for each participant and identified key quotes relevant to the phenomenon.

Special attention was given to the autodriven portion of the interview, emphasizing the meanings each individual gave to their actions. With the narrative memos, emergent codes were further employed to find commonalities, repetitions, and original typologies (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). I then created several mind maps, which helped me derive categories and later themes from the data.

To establish a coherent understanding of the phenomenon, I reflected the analysis against Bourdieu's cultural capital theory. I acknowledge that both fashion capital and technological capital play a role in how consumers interact with algorithms. Furthermore, I recognized each participant as a 'player' in the fashion field and focused on how algorithm awareness informed their field maneuverings (Rocamora, 2002). For example, when analyzing the data, I wanted to understand if the participants, as fashion 'players,' tried to protect their field standing or gain more capital through their interactions on Instagram. The theoretically-driven framework helped to ground the findings. All in all, the analysis was an iterative process of going back and forth between the transcriptions, memos, themes, and theory (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

To fully understand the findings, it is helpful to know the following definitions:

The Fashion Field is defined by the unequal distribution of fashion capital amongst different players. As players acquire capital, they maneuver amongst each other within the field (Rocomora, 2002). In this study, I view players as consumers striving to be the highest fashion.

High Fashion refers to high culture. A high fashion consumer is someone possessing high levels of capital. A high fashion commodity is something unique and addressed to a limited audience (Rocomora, 2002).

Inspiration can be understood as the creative research that influences a consumer's fashion choices.

Devaluation occurs when a form of capital, such as a designer or trend, becomes commercialized and too mainstream to be considered high fashion.

4. Findings

From the interviews, I found that not only are fashion consumers highly aware of Instagram's algorithm, but they also use it as a strategic tool for their fashion field maneuvering. Through the analysis, five broad themes emerged from the data. The themes are: 1) how and why fashion consumers use Instagram, 2) using the algorithm as a curation tool, 3) using the algorithm as a conduit for recognizing capital devaluation, 4) algorithmic social capital misalignments, 5) how consumers respond to algorithmic misalignments. The findings related to these themes will now be further explained.

4. 1 Understanding Platform Usage

4. 1. 1 Building Capital Through Socialization and Inspiration

To explore the link between fashion as a competitive consumption field and how consumers interact with the algorithm, it is essential to understand why and how fashion consumers use Instagram. Through the interviews, two primary reasons consumers use Instagram emerged: socialization and inspiration. As Bourdieu (1993) suggests, socialization ties into social capital building and inspiration is associated with building cultural capital. Additionally, I found that interactions varied from unintentional to strategic based on how the algorithm played into one's fashion field maneuverings.

When it comes to socialization, who a consumer chooses to follow is linked to how much they use the platform to guide their fashion choices. Someone who does not rely on Instagram for fashion knowledge will mainly follow friends and values communication over following miscellaneous, inspirational accounts. For example, Kat shared that her primary reason for using Instagram is to check in with friends rather than inspiration.

> "*The main reason I'm on Instagram is checking in with friends, and that doesn't necessarily mesh with inspiration. Like, I think of it more as a space for communicating, not cool inspiration." (Kat)*

Other participants concurred with Kat's view of Instagram as a space for communication between friends. This shows that sociability is not only about the competitive social capital building associated with Bourdieu, but it also is about friendship (Bourdieu, 1993). I found that the more a person relies on Instagram as a field maneuvering tool, the more their socialization becomes linked to capital building. Someone who heavily relies on Instagram as a field maneuvering tool will mostly follow brands, influencers, or fashion publications. Additionally, they will be highly selective about which accounts they choose to follow. For example, Emelia shared she purposefully follows accounts based on her desire to show the algorithm what she wants to see.

> *"I always go to the explore page instead of my feed. I still follow people, which I guess is weird, but honestly, I sort of see it as like, oh, they're going to cater the other things I get to see based off of what I follow." (Emelia)*

Emelia's choice to go to the Explore feed instead of checking in on the people she follows shows that she socializes primarily to build social capital, increasing her fashion field standing. Interestingly, I found that it is common for consumers who heavily use Instagram for field maneuvering to primarily browse the Explore feed because they are seeking new inspiration.

Inspirational Instagram content can help consumers build cultural capital through styling ideas, new trends, or discovering cool brands and items to purchase. Through interacting with content, consumers train the algorithm to provide inspirational recommendations. Like building social capital, someone who heavily uses Instagram to acquire cultural capital will be more strategic in training the algorithm. However, there isn't an aggressive need to constantly find new inspiration. Instead, people are strategic because it's fun and pleasurable. For example, Halle shared that she is strategic because it makes her happy.

> *"I like looking at pretty things that make me happy. Like it gives me a little boost of serotonin. So, yes, I'm manipulative, but it's just for personal gain." (Halle)*

I identified Halle as the most manipulative in both her social and cultural interactions with the algorithm of my participants. Despite this, her quote reveals that the motivation behind her

manipulation is not to gain fashion status but to gain happiness. This finding is similar to that of Lipovetsky (1994), who found that consumption is no longer a quest for social recognition but more so an act to achieve well-being and pleasure for its own sake.

While socialization and inspiration emerged as the two primary uses, consumers use Instagram for various benefits and sit somewhere on a spectrum between pure socialization and seeking inspiration. For example, Mackenzie explained that she uses Instagram for fashion inspiration and staying up to date with her friends.

> *"I go on Instagram for fun, honestly. And also, a lot for fashion inspiration. I feel like I follow more fashion accounts than people I know. But I also love that it is a good, easy way to know what's going on in people's lives." (Mackenzie)*

Here, Mackenzie indicates that while fashion inspiration is one of the key reasons she goes on Instagram, ultimately, she uses the platform because it is fun. This was a common sentiment across the interviews. While fashion consumers may use Instagram as a field maneuvering tool, fashion-related interactions only make up a portion of their overall platform use. For even the most strategic users, the main goal is to enjoy their time on Instagram.

4.1.2 *How One's Social Media View Impacts Use*

Through the interviews, I found that platform usage and algorithm awareness is mediated by one's view of social media. One participant, Kat, tries to be very mindful of how she uses social media and, consequently, doesn't use the algorithm to inform her fashion choices. She explained how her decision to become mindful stemmed from her realization that social media can negatively impact mental health.

> *"I think that nowadays social media is really affecting people. Whether it's depression, or anxiety, or 'FOMO,' people are realizing the impact it has. So with that being a conversation out there, I've reflected and realized I wanted to be more mindful in how I use it… Especially on Instagram, I feel like it becomes a scrolling exercise, and whenever I feel myself starting to get into that, I exit out right away." (Kat)*

In this quote, Kat explained how social media has been linked to several mental health concerns. While they may stem from different aspects, Kat recognized that she was significantly affected by Instagram. She explained a particular dislike for the "scrolling exercise," where she would find herself scrolling through infinite amounts of content without taking the time to process the imagery fully. To avoid this behavior, Kat tries to primarily use Instagram to communicate with friends. Consequently, she doesn't use Instagram as a tool in her field maneuvering and doesn't consider how the algorithm will interpret her interactions.

In contrast to Kat, Halle shared that focusing on her mental health lead her to be more intentional on Instagram, turning it into an inspirational space.

> *"I realized I was following a bunch of people that I'm just straight-up never going to look like or have the same lifestyle as them, and it was kind of just making me feel like garbage. I found myself comparing a lot, and it just wasn't bringing me joy anymore. So, I made an effort to follow accounts that are encouraging, positive and bright, inclusive and all that kind of stuff. Now, when I get on Instagram, I'm not going to feel drained when I get off. I'm going to feel excited because I have a new idea or I'll be like, oh my gosh, I just found a new top I need to buy! Now I am inspired by what I see." (Halle)*

After realizing that she could be excited by Instagram rather than drained, Halle became more thoughtful with her algorithmic interactions. By following accounts that inspire her and being thoughtful about the content she interacts with, Halle has transformed Instagram into a positive space that she can use as a tool for building cultural capital.

4. 2 The Algorithm as a Curation Tool

Whereas Bourdieu's sociology of the field of fashion draws on the conceptual tools of maneuvering, my findings show that algorithms can be a tangible, strategic tool (Rocamora, 2002). Specifically, I found that some fashion consumers use the algorithm to curate inspiration and discover new styles. These consumers place a high level of trust in the algorithm's

recommendations because they have trained it to feed their fashion needs. In this section, I will further explain how using the algorithm as a curation tool helps consumers in their fashion field maneuverings and the mitigating factors of using the algorithm in this way.

4.2.1 Using the Algorithm For Curation

For fashion consumers, Instagram is a crucial source of inspiration. While some consumers are indifferent to algorithmic recommendations, some highly competitive fashion 'players' have learned that the algorithm can amplify their field status. These consumers intentionally interact with the algorithm, training it to curate high fashion inspiration and shopping suggestions. For example, Halle shared how she learned to manipulate the algorithm to give recommendations that help her play the fashion game.

> *"I started just like following like little random accounts here and there, and I noticed my explore page started sort of like curating some content that I was very interested in. So I thought, okay, let me keep trying that, and then slowly, it's turned into this really inspirational and cool space… I love going down a rabbit hole and finding something really cool. Like, I honestly will scroll my page for hours, and I get this little dose of serotonin when I find something unique." (Halle)*

In the citation, Halle shared how training the algorithm resulted in it curating an inspirational space, exposing her to exciting content. Interestingly, she pointed out how she gets a "dose of serotonin" when she finds something unique, highlighting how the algorithm directly improves her mood by exposing her to new styles. Using the algorithm as a curation tool has consequently increased Halle's consumption.

> *"Honestly, it just makes me want to buy more things because I'm constantly finding cool stuff, and I'm like, I love this, I need this." (Halle)*

Emelia also has learned to manipulate the algorithm in a way that helps in her fashion field maneuverings. While Halle spoke of using the algorithm to curate new products and guide her consumption, Emelia uses the algorithm to curate styling inspiration.

> *"I will literally go on the Instagram sometimes to figure out what I want to wear. I'll scroll a bit on the explore page and then gain inspiration from an outfit and then recreate it for myself." (Emelia)*

Halle and Emelia have put time and effort into training the algorithm, and because of this, they fully trust and are indulgent in its recommendations. While they can use the algorithm as a tool in their field maneuverings, it should be understood that a pre-existing level of fashion capital and familiarity with the technology is required to train the algorithm and use it in this way. The consumer must know which content to interact with, what to ignore, and be able to spot capital misalignments on the platform. This is similar to Entwistle and Rocamora's (2006) review of London Fashion Week, which found that only players already belonging to the fashion field can access the event. Essentially, the algorithm can be used to make field maneuverings easier but cannot be used to gain capital that the consumer didn't previously possess.

4.2.2 *Ability to Train*

I discovered that the ability to train the algorithm as a curation tool comes from familiarity with the algorithm. While all participants were aware that their actions are tracked, some were much more familiar than others about how Instagram processes their data and uses it to curate their feeds. This increased familiarity meant they are more perceptive to the algorithm's functions and are more skilled at interacting in a strategic way. For example, after sharing the study topic, I asked Halle if she attempts to manipulate the algorithm. She explained that previous experiences have given her the requisite knowledge to successfully train the algorithm and influence her platform experience.

> *"Oh yeah, that's all I do on Instagram! I think a lot of it does come from the fact that I did have minors in media, marketing, and public relations. So, I'm not completely blind to all of that. Like my internship was literally studying the analytics of how consumers interact*

with the social media account that I was running at the time. So, I definitely understand a bit of what goes on, and I love being able to help curate this super inspirational space." (Halle)

However, many people were less familiar with the algorithm and lacked the knowledge to effectively use it as a curation tool. In these cases, people expressed frustration that Instagram often fails to provide desirable material for them. For example, when I asked Lissa if she thinks that her Instagram experience could be better, she explained that she does but doesn't know how to change it.

"Oh, 1000 percent. But then again, like, how could it be better? I guess it would maybe depend on how I interact with things. But honestly, I don't really know. But I'm tired of seeing ads or like things that just seem so random that I have no clue why they are on my feed." (Lissa)

Even in cases where people were familiar with training the algorithm, they desired more control. Maddie explained how she tries to train the algorithm to use it as a curation tool but becomes frustrated that certain actions seem to carry much more weight than others.

"I know that my interactions affect what I'll see, but why do some interactions have so much more of an effect? Like, I follow a few accounts about frogs because I love them, but my whole explore page will be covered in frogs when the majority of what I follow is fashion, so I'm like what?... It's really frustrating. I feel like with Instagram, there are just so many issues. Like, if you do one wrong click, it's going to affect what you see so much, and a lot of people are tired of it and are going elsewhere." (Maddie)

This ties into Reviglio and Agosti's (2020) concept of algorithmic sovereignty, which says that social media platforms deny consumers possibilities to participate in the decision-making process of algorithms. They found that the sovereignty of algorithms is at battle with consumers' desire to play a role in the personalization of their feeds (Reviglio and Agosti, 2020). My study supports

their findings and found that even people who can train the algorithm would appreciate more direct opportunities to personalize the platform.

Despite a shared level of fashion capital among participants, they did not possess an equal ability to train the algorithm and effectively use it as a curation tool. Therefore, understanding algorithmic influence seems to stem mainly from repeated exposure to algorithms rather than one's amount of fashion capital.

4.2.3 Willingness to Train

Besides having the ability, consumers must be willing to train the algorithm if they wish to use it as a curation tool for capital building. Previous literature has shown that when consumers participate in training the algorithm, they provide audience labor (Carah and Angus, 2018). Academics have widely assumed that consumers are happy to put in the effort to train the algorithm and do it unknowingly. However, I found that some consumers are acutely aware of this labor and feel it shouldn't be their job. Mackenzie, for example, explained how she has contemplated whether putting in the effort to train the algorithm would be worth it or not.

> *"You know, on the one hand, I'm trying to cut down on time on my phone, so I don't want to spend tons of time trying to make Instagram better. But at the same time, if I'm going to be spending any time looking at it, should I like it more? Like, I know I would like it more, and it would be more inspirational if I tried. But then again, I'm like, no, I don't really want to spend the time teaching the algorithm to work. That isn't a job I should have to do." (Mackenzie)*

In the citation, Mackenzie shared that she is trying to cut down on how much time she spends on her phone. Thus, she doesn't want to waste time teaching the algorithm to function in a better way, even if it could make the platform more inspirational. Essentially, Mackenzie is saying that she would rather sacrifice the algorithm's full potential as a curation tool than spend her time training it.

While many consumers share Mackenzie's view, we know that increased audience labor leads to improved algorithmic targeting (Carah and Angus, 2018). Therefore, consumers who put in the effort to train will have the most success using it as a curation tool and gain the most help in their field maneuvering. For example, Martina explained that she actively tries to teach Instagram her user habits, and as a result, she highly values Instagram as a source for fashion inspiration.

> *"If I see that something is mixed up in my Explore page, I'm going to do my best to kind of make it change. I only want to have content that I'm interested in… So, I would actively search for even more brands that I think are nice so the algorithm can kind of get to know my user habits…For me, social media really influences my style and desires, so of course, I want it to show me the best content possible." (Martina)*

Here, Martina explains precisely how she would train the algorithm to show her the best content possible. While this quote shows her willingness to participate in audience labor, it also indicates her knowledge of influencing the algorithm. Interestingly, I found that only consumers with a solid ability to train the algorithm are happily willing to participate in the labor, contrasting previously published literature (Carah and Angus, 2018). Thus, to successfully use the Instagram algorithm as a curation tool for managing capital, a consumer must be willing and able to train it.

4. 3 The Algorithm as a Conduit for Abandoning Devalued Forms of Capital

4. 3. 1 Using the Algorithm to Abandon Devalued Fashion

While some highly competitive fashion 'players' use the algorithm as a tool for curating inspiration, others recognize it as a conduit for abandoning devalued forms of capital (Rocamora, 2002). Consumers who use the algorithm in this way tend to be skeptical of its ability to reflect the fashion field accurately. They believe that data-driven recommendations are affected by commercialization, and therefore, anything pushed by the algorithm has been devalued (Rocamora, 2002). For these players, it is crucial to always be ahead of mass-culture fashion, and they have discovered that by paying attention to algorithmic output, they know when to ditch a trend. For example, Maddie explained the unique way she views fashion on Instagram.

"I definitely look at fashion on Instagram, but I wouldn't say I take direct inspiration from it. Actually, it's more like the complete opposite. It's like if I see that everyone has the same thing, I instantly don't want it." (Maddie)

In the citation, Maddie displays a classic Bourdieu moment wherein high fashion consumers quickly abandon commercialized fashion to protect their standing within the fashion field (Rocamora, 2002). To further explain how the algorithm informs her of commercialized capital, Maddie shared how she knew it was time to move on from a beloved handbag once it began to fill her feed.

"I bought this Prada bag, and when I first saw it, only like one blogger had it. I mean, I couldn't even find the name of it, and I was so pumped to buy it. And then, I saw Kylie Jenner post it, and instantly I was like, I need to sell the bag. I was like, it's over at this point. Like it's literally going to blow up, and sure enough, my feed just became covered in it. I feel like it comes in waves where if you catch a trend on the wave up, it's great, but then when Instagram becomes flooded in something, I'm no longer interested. And it's like, is this really everywhere, or is Instagram just making me think that it is? But, in either scenario, I don't want anything to do with it." (Maddie)

In this example, Maddie shares how the repetitive nature of constantly seeing the same handbag on Instagram informed her that it was no longer trendy. For consumers like Maddie, the algorithm's recommendations are viewed as proof of capital devaluation.

Like Maddie, Jessica is skeptical about the algorithm's interpretation of fashion. She is unsure if the algorithm's recommendations are genuinely targeted to her interests or simply pushed to everyone. Additionally, Jessica said the algorithm makes her question her intuition as a stylist. She has always believed herself to be a trendsetter. However, when the algorithm covers her feed with similar styles, it fills her with doubt.

"It sucks because I think once your Explore Page gets you a little bit, it just starts showing you the same stuff. Like, I've been really into the interior designer Gustaf Westman, and I

decorated my whole room like that. But now I'm just seeing his stuff everywhere, and it seems like everyone is making their rooms like that. I'm like, ughhhh. I mean, I like to be way ahead of the time with décor and fashion, and I thought I was. But now I don't know because it's all I see on Instagram. I think it's dangerous because then you start not trusting yourself. You know, I keep seeing the same things everywhere, and it's like, is this really built for me, or is everyone doing this? So, then I get pushed away from the things I see on Instagram." (Jessica)

By saying that she likes to be "way ahead of the time with décor and fashion," Jessica reveals that maintaining high fashion standing is crucial to her. Like Maddie, she explained how the repetitive nature of the algorithm triggers her to become aware and abandon mainstream capital.

4.4.2 *Repetition and Advertising as Signals of Devaluation*

To use the algorithm as a conduit for abandoning devalued capital, a consumer must be perceptive to moments when it fails to mirror the fashion field. My participants were eager to discuss how repetitive content and advertising break the naturalistic idea of inspiration, causing consumers to question whether the algorithm is reliable. While some informants understood that the algorithm works by showing you similar content to what you've already liked, the majority found this to be a pushy reminder that Instagram is ultimately a consumption-driven platform. For example, Kat lamented how she dislikes the pushy nature of Instagram.

"I don't want to feel like I'm having trends pushed down my mouth, which I definitely feel like that on Instagram, and I hate that… I feel like a lot of it feels forced. I never want to feel like I'm such a consumer. I feel like Instagram definitely makes you feel that way very easily." (Kat)

Kat expressed how repetition makes the platform feel forced, causing her to doubt the algorithm's integrity. Similar to Kat, Lissa explained that she is simply tired of being shown repetitive content.

"I'm tired of seeing ads, I'm tired of seeing, like, really overdone trends, and then on top of that, I'm so tired of seeing the same faces. I think I get tired of Instagram just pushing

the same people… I just don't think Instagram works very well sometimes. Like I want to be inspired by a mix of things, not just the same style, brand, or blogger over and over again." (Lissa)

Lissa shared how repetition helps her identify "really overdone trends." This enforces her belief that Instagram helps uncover commercialized capital but doesn't always work as a source for high fashion inspiration. In addition to repetitive content, I discovered that paid promotions make consumers doubt the authenticity of recommendations. Like Rocamora (2002), my participants shared that advertising causes them to question whether the trends they are finding are truly high fashion or falsely produced by commercialization. For example, Maddie shared how she finds paid-for content to be disingenuous and would prefer to find brands organically.

"Very rarely do I see an ad and think, wow, thank you so much for sharing this with me. Because I feel nothing has been that great that I've purchased off Instagram. It almost seems like the new fake or cheap store. Like Ali Express kind of vibes. So when I see sponsored posts, I become skeptical and less likely to be interested in the brand versus a brand who actually has a really clever social media strategy that I find naturally." (Maddie)

In contrast to Maddie, some consumers who have trained the algorithm to be a curation tool view advertising as an inspiration source for their field maneuvering. For example, Halle explained that she loves sponsored content and will speak to her phone, hoping to make her consumption process easier.

"I get a ton of ads, and I'm a sucker for them, so I think that's why I keep getting them. But honestly, I've kind of figured out how to get recommendations that I actually love… My friends think I'm crazy, but our phones are listening to us, so I figure why not take advantage of that, and now I'm finding the coolest stuff! Like, if I'm looking for a leather jacket, I will literally pick up my phone and say "leather jacket," and then I'll start getting ads for them." (Halle)

Halle's experience shows that advertising is appreciated when it appropriately answers a consumer's need and can be used as a strategic maneuvering tool. However, for most consumers, advertising, like repetition, breaks the illusion that the algorithm can mirror high fashion. Recognizing these moments of algorithmic cultural misalignments enables some consumers to use the algorithm as a tool for abandoning devalued forms of capital, ensuring their high fashion standing.

4. 4 Social Capital Misalignments

Through the interviews, social capital misalignments were commonly discussed as indicators that the algorithm is flawed. My interviewees shared that when content is poorly targeted, and they don't see favored accounts, they start to question if the algorithm is reliable for informing their fashion choices. Furthermore, as Rocamora (2002) explained, celebrities or influencers play a role in the symbolic production of fashion. Therefore, when a consumer is shown a style on someone who lacks high fashion standing, they will avoid the trend. However, the most common social misalignments occur when consumers miss posts from their friends or are frequently shown the same influencers. Some interviewees found that this frequently occurs on their feed and is a source of frustration. For example, Mackenzie shared how she will often miss posts from her favorite accounts, causing her to question the platform's efficacy for her intended use.

> *"I've also noticed that not only is the content repetitive, but it won't even show me content that I actually care about. Like even for accounts that I closely follow and interact with all of their posts, sometimes I'll go to their profile and realize I missed a bunch of their posts. I don't understand why it didn't show me those, which is kind of annoying. I'm like, you're so smart, [the algorithm] probably know us better than we know ourselves, but then it still can mess up. So it's annoying because I follow every account with a purpose. So when I see that I've missed all this stuff, it frustrates me and honestly makes me doubt how well it works." (Mackenzie)*

Irina has also found that content shown on her feed is often misaligned with what she would like to see. However, she discovered that her stories tend to be ordered better and explained how she is more likely to browse the stories than her feed as a consequence.

> *"I feel like many of the accounts that I follow won't show up on my feed but will show up on the stories…Like for example, I don't even remember why I follow this account. I don't even know who she is. So why is this the first photo on my feed? But then, if I look at my stories, they are all accounts that I'm really interested in… I really don't think that [the algorithm] works great for me or anyone really." (Irina)*

People realize they would like the algorithm to be more functional for their usage when they are missing out on content they would like to see. Some consumers may choose to adjust their interactions to influence the algorithm. However, many lack the ability or interest to do so and become frustrated with the platform. Like cultural misalignments, social misalignments trigger awareness that the algorithm may incorrectly reflect the fashion field. Consequently, these occurrences cause consumers to question whether they should find additional sources of fashion inspiration or continue to primarily use Instagram despite its imperfections.

4. 5 Responding to Algorithm Misalignments

Like Bourdieu (1993), I found that once people become aware of algorithmic capital misalignments, they respond in strategic ways. Some consumers respond to flaws by retraining the algorithm through various strategic interactions. However, other consumers may abandon the platform and seek new sources of fashion inspiration, which they deem more appropriate for their needs.

4. 5. 1 Retraining the Algorithm

When recognizing algorithm shortcomings, consumers who use the algorithm for curation can become very strategic in their interactions. For example, Martina shared that she is a highly active user of Instagram, and it strongly influences her fashion choices. Because of this, she has learned to be conscious of the content she is shown versus the content she wants to see and will actively work to ensure the algorithm functions better for her.

> *"You know, I spend so much time on Instagram… So I think it influences my shopping habits a lot….If I open my Explore page and I see something that is just not supposed to be there, then I'm going to make an active decision and take action to change it." (Martina)*

Martina is among a group of consumers who are willing and able to train the algorithm. To do this, they utilize various strategies, including following new accounts, unfollowing devalued accounts, saving images, liking or un-liking photos, hiding advertisements, clicking on specific content on the Explore page, or creating a separate account for fashion. Emelia shared her strategy for retraining the algorithm.

> *"Okay, so for example, I truly do not like anything pop-culture-related, and I don't follow it at all. So if stuff like that comes up on explore, then I'm like, oh man. Like, I don't want that to come up, so I don't click on it. And instead, I want to click on something else that's more me, and then hopefully, other things will populate.… I'm definitely strategic with how I respond to what I see and what I choose to interact with." (Emelia)*

In this example, Emelia explains how she is careful to interact with content that will signal the algorithm to find fashion that aligns with her taste. This seemed to be a common and effective strategy used by the participants to tell the algorithm what they wanted to see. Additionally, participants like or save specific images to strengthen the algorithm's connection to content with high cultural capital. To inform the algorithm of accounts with high social capital, they seek out specific, inspirational brands or people to follow. On the other hand, to distance themselves from devalued forms of cultural capital, they may un-like previously liked photos or click to hide advertisements. Likewise, they can re-establish social order by unfollowing accounts that are no longer interesting.

It was also fascinating to learn that, in some cases, consumers may choose to create a separate Instagram account for curating an entirely inspirational space. By decoupling their fashion field maneuverings from their social engagements, they can continue interacting with friends on their original account without interfering with the algorithm's data. Halle explained how creating a separate account helped turn Instagram into a positive and inspirational space.

"I actually made a new one last year because I was getting tired of my old one. It just was not representative of who I am. And what in turn has happened is, I found just like so many more cool accounts. On my old Instagram, I was following all of these random people. So, all of my recommendations or like ads and stuff were not really targeted great. So, I made sure on the new one I was only following fashion or brands I love, and bands I like, or artists, and all that kind of stuff. In turn, I think it reads me so well, and I just love it now… I feel like the content it curates is spot on, and it's become the really positive, inspirational space." (Halle)

Halle found that decoupling her fashion maneuvering from her social maneuvering allowed her to more fully enable Instagram to become an effective tool for curating capital. Halle was among two other participants who created accounts devoted to inspiration. Having a specific space to browse fashion has made their consumption processes more exciting because they are more frequently exposed to new brands, styles, and unique items. While I found a range of enthusiasm for retraining the algorithm, it seems the more a consumer values Instagram as a fashion tool, the more effort they will give.

4.5.2 *Abandoning the Platform*

As previously discussed, many consumers either lack the ability or are unwilling to spend time training the algorithm. For these consumers, abandoning the platform may be the preferred response to algorithmic misalignments. This finding is similar to that of Rocamora (2002), who recognized that fashion consumers will abandon devalued sources of capital to retain their fashion standing. In this case, consumers view the algorithm itself as a devalued source of fashion knowledge. Commonly, several participants agreed that Pinterest is their preferred source of inspiration because they have become frustrated with Instagram's algorithm. Kat spoke at length about why she likes Pinterest more than Instagram, saying that Instagram lacks genuine inspiration.

"I think I'm definitely starting to distance from Instagram a bit, and the explore page reminds me of a Pinterest board. So, I would rather go to Pinterest because I find the content so well-curated there, and, as a platform, I feel like Instagram is so much more ad-

based and consumerism-based that I don't think it's genuine inspiration. I mean, the algorithm is so affected by the paid promotions and what will sell that I don't really trust what it shows." (Kat)

While Kat prefers Pinterest because it has less sponsored content, Maddie explained that the Instagram algorithm's social misalignments played a significant role in her shift to Pinterest.

"Honestly, the algorithm annoys me so much. Like I literally can't stand it…. More often than not, friends of mine will post, and I won't even see it… It's definitely led me to be more choosy in the accounts I follow, and I feel like a lot of people, myself included, have made their way back to Pinterest for inspiration instead of Instagram. Because with Instagram, there are too many issues. Like if you do one wrong click it's going to have such a big effect on what you get to see, and a lot of people are tired of it." (Maddie)

Unlike Kat and Maddie, Irina shared that she doesn't think Instagram can accurately target her because there are so many other aspects to Instagram aside from fashion inspiration.

"I like Pinterest more because the only purpose is to pin and save the photos. Where on Instagram, there are so many other things. When I go to Pinterest, the main thing that I go there for is inspiration… Where Instagram, I think, is first for connecting with other people and then getting inspired or being informed." (Irina)

These examples display multiple reasons why consumers may turn to Pinterest when Instagram is not meeting their desires. By abandoning the platform, these consumers feel they will find inspiration more aligned with their fashion goals. Choosing to find inspiration elsewhere indicates that, due to perceived algorithmic flaws, Instagram is not always viewed as an essential consumption or field maneuvering tool.

4. 6 Summary of the Findings

Based on the data, I recognized that consumers use Instagram for a combination of socialization and inspiration. Socialization ties into one's social capital building, while inspiration is associated

with building cultural capital. Additionally, a person's interactions will vary from unintentional to strategic, depending on how the algorithm plays into their fashion field maneuverings. Someone who purely uses Instagram to socialize with friends is not likely to consider how the algorithm interprets their interactions. In contrast, someone who heavily relies on Instagram for gaining capital will be thoughtful with who they follow and how they interact with content to train the algorithm. However, even the most strategic users are motivated by the desire to make their platform experience enjoyable rather than by an aggressive need to acquire capital. While these exclusively different user categories exist, most people fall somewhere on the spectrum between the two. It was also interesting to discover that the likelihood of a person using Instagram as a capital tool is also mediated by how they view social media. More specifically, if someone tries to limit their time spent on social media, they are not likely to use it as a fashion tool.

I also found that many fashion consumers use the algorithm as a curation tool for finding inspiration and building capital. However, their propensity to do so is dependent on their familiarity with algorithms and willingness to participate in audience labor. While some consumers can manipulate the algorithm in a meaningful way, most were less familiar with these practices and voiced frustration that Instagram gives the user such little control. In addition to having the acquired knowledge, a user must be willing to participate in the audience labor of training the algorithm. While previous literature has commonly thought that consumers are happy to spend time teaching the algorithm their habits, many participants said it was not something they wanted to spend their time on. The algorithm is also used as a conduit for abandoning forms of devalued capital. Consumers who use it in this way always want to be ahead of mainstream fashion and believe that once the algorithm is pushing a trend, it has become too commercialized and is no longer high fashion. They referenced repetitive content and advertising as signals of cultural misalignment, indicating that it is time for them to ditch a trend. Not only do repetition and advertising inform consumers of over-done styles, but they cause people to question the algorithm's reliability to provide them with what they desire.

Like cultural misalignments, social misalignments trigger awareness that the algorithm may incorrectly reflect the fashion field. People realize the algorithm needs to improve when they are missing out on the content they believe they should be seeing. Some consumers may choose to

adjust their interactions and retrain the algorithm. Strategies may include following new accounts, unfollowing devalued accounts, saving images, liking or un-liking content, hiding advertisements, or viewing specific content on the Explore page. In some cases, consumers may create a separate account to curate an inspirational space without interfering with their social interactions. While these strategic responses exist, many users lack the ability or interest to influence the algorithm significantly for their purposes. This can lead to frustration and potential abandonment of the platform with the intent to build capital elsewhere.

5. Discussion

This research sought to broaden the current understanding of the relationship between consumers and algorithms. More aptly, I was interested in how highly knowledgeable fashion consumers interact with and perceive algorithms. Fashion served as an appropriate focus because it is a competitive field that is highly governed by social media algorithms such as Instagram's. As a visually-driven platform, Instagram is a primary space for fashion consumers to maneuver the fashion field and was selected as the study's context. The study was qualitative and conducted through semi-structured interviews analyzed with Pierre Bourdieu's framework of cultural and social capital (Rocamora, 2002). The research question guiding the study was: how do fashion consumers interact with algorithms?

The study resulted in several important discoveries concerning the relationship between consumers and algorithms. Notably, I found that most fashion consumers are intimately aware of Instagram's algorithm and strategically interact with it. Through thoughtful interactions, consumers enable the algorithm to be a tool in their fashion field maneuvering. Some consumers use the algorithm as a curation tool to acquire new forms of capital. However, the success of using the algorithm to curate capital is mediated by one's familiarity with the algorithm and their willingness to train it. In some cases, strategic consumers create a separate account for fashion, allowing the algorithm to curate an entirely inspirational, well-targeted space. However, other consumers use the algorithm as a conduit for recognizing and abandoning devalued capital. In this case, they rely on algorithmic cultural misalignments such as repetitive content and advertisements to signal when a style has been commercialized. Like cultural misalignments, algorithmic social misalignments break the illusion that Instagram successfully mirror's the fashion field. While many fashion consumers can effectively influence the algorithm and retrain it when necessary, others may leave the platform if too many misalignments are recognized. These findings are further discussed below in the light of existing theory.

5. 1 Broadening our Understanding of Consumer–Algorithm Relationships

With the aim of this study being to broaden the academic understanding of consumer-algorithm relationships, several emergent discoveries were found. First, contrasting most existing literature, the findings of this study show that fashion consumers are clearly aware of algorithms and can effectively manipulate them. While all of my participants were aware of being targeted by Instagram's algorithm, some were more knowledgeable at how to influence it, confirming Smith et al. (2020) suggestion of a range of awareness. By identifying this spectrum of awareness, I showed a relationship between how knowledgeable a consumer is and how they approach the algorithm. For example, on one end of the spectrum, consumers unfamiliar with the algorithm may attempt to manipulate it to improve their experience. However, their efforts are less successful than consumers on the other end of the spectrum who are very familiar and can successfully train the algorithm to perform as a curation tool. This finding stands in contrast to Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) and Shin (2020), who claimed that consumers could not effectively influence the algorithm to improve their platform experience.

I showed that a relationship between consumer knowledge and algorithm interactions does exist. However, it was found that the relationship is not linear because social media is used for multiple purposes. More specifically, most consumers use social media for the social aspect, with fashion field maneuvering being a secondary interest. Therefore, they cannot be intentional with every interaction and will likely interact with content that does not inspire their fashion choices, making it difficult to influence the algorithm meaningfully. Despite this, it is evident that expert consumers, such as those who create separate accounts for their consumption, have a much higher likelihood of becoming aware of the algorithm and playing with it for their benefit. Because the audience labor of training algorithms has been shown to be advantageous for marketers, my findings, showing that not all consumers can train equally, are essential to acknowledge (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020).

Next, the findings of this study show that algorithmic perceptions vary from highly skeptical to indulgent even when the content is highly targeted. This finding challenges several previous studies which assert the view that consumers respond positively to well-targeted recommendations. For example, Shin (2020) found that consumers perceive algorithms to be

useful when accurate. For fashion consumers, the way they perceive recommendations ties into their fashion field maneuvering. Consumers who have trained the algorithm to function as a curation tool become true believers in the recommendations they are shown. However, others are more skeptical of what they are shown, questioning if it is genuinely high fashion and accurately targeted for them or if it's become mainstream. One of my participants, Jessica, discussed how she always wants to be ahead of trends. When she sees repetition in Instagram content, she will respond by abandoning the style, believing it has become too mainstream. For consumers like Jessica, accurate targeting will push them away from trends rather than inspiring them. This finding is notable because previous literature has overwhelmingly shown that brands benefit from targeted recommendations boosting sales (Smith et al., 2020; Carah and Angus, 2018). However, for high fashion consumers, targeting could actually result in them avoiding a product.

Finally, I found that consumers use the algorithm as a tool in their consumption process. While previous literature has focused on brands and influencers using the algorithm as a tool, the idea of consumers doing the same has been largely overlooked (Cotter, 2018). Just as Influencers use the algorithm to play a visibility game, my study shows that consumers can use the algorithm to play the fashion game. Like consumer perceptions of recommendations, using the algorithm as a tool has to do with fashion field maneuvering. Some consumers train it to curate new forms of capital, though doing so requires familiarity with the algorithm and an ongoing willingness to train it. Other consumers use it to identify and abandon devalued fashion, a classic Bordieuan activity to maintain high field positioning (Rocamora, 2002). This discovery reveals that the relationship between consumers and algorithms is far from passive. Instead, consumers recognize that the algorithm can be manipulated to their benefit.

5. 2 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to existing theory by uncovering how fashion consumers interact and use algorithms within their consumption practice. The research expands upon the current understanding of consumer and algorithm relationships by studying the phenomenon in the context of Instagram, a primary playing field for fashion consumers.

Theory has previously focused on how brands use and benefit from algorithms, neglecting an understanding of consumer-algorithm relationships (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020; Tang et al., 2018; Cotter, 2018). Consequently, this study resulted in several novel discoveries which broaden the current understanding of the phenomenon. First, I showed that consumers are aware of algorithms and can interact with them in a manipulative way. This finding challenges Ruckenstein and Granroth (2020) and Shin (2020), who believed consumers could not effectively influence the algorithm. Next, I found that many fashion consumers respond negatively to targeted content, viewing it as commercialized capital. This response challenges the findings of Shin (2020), who found that consumers perceive algorithms to be useful when accurate. It also challenges the results of Smith et al. (2020) and Carah and Angus (2018). They showed that brands could expect higher sales from accurate targeting (Smith et al., 2020; Carah and Angus, 2018). However, I showed that some consumers use targeted content to signal the devaluation of capital, thus resulting in no sale. Finally, I found that consumers use the algorithm as a tool in their consumption process. This discovery enhances the work of Cotter (2018), who studied how brands and influencers use algorithms because I have now introduced consumers into the discussion.

This study also supported ideas presented in previous literature on algorithms. I showed that consumers could manipulate algorithms, supporting the findings of Shepherd (2020), Nuenen (2019), and Mckenzie (2020). However, my study differed from theirs in that I researched the use of social media algorithms for consumption purposes. While some of my participants stood in contrast to this finding, several confirmed Shin (2020), who claimed algorithms are useful when accurate. Furthermore, I found that consumers who train the algorithm put in the effort because they enjoy receiving highly targeted recommendations. The findings also showed that consumers desire a higher level of participation in the algorithm's decision-making process. This supports Reviglio and Agosti (2020), who suggested that platforms should strive to maintain user trust by providing more opportunities for consumers to directly influence their recommended content. Next, the study identified a range of algorithmic awareness within consumers, confirming Smith et al. (2020) suspicion that social media users are more aware than previously believed. Finally, the study supported Sands et al. (2019) by finding that fashion consumers also attempt to mitigate risks presented by algorithms. This was shown through participants who minimized time spent on

the platform to reduce the risk of algorithmic recommendations negatively impacting their mental health.

The results of this research also challenge existing literature. Much of the existing literature recognizes accurate targeting as a critical benefit of algorithms for brands (Carah and Brodmerkel, 2020; Smith et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2018). However, my study challenges these findings by showing that most consumers are frustrated with the algorithm's failure to recommend fashion of interest. Furthermore, I showed that it is difficult for social media algorithms to get an accurate read on consumption behavior because consumers use these platforms for multiple reasons. Therefore, interacting with content that doesn't always align with their fashion preferences. Finally, the findings contrast previous literature, which has shown that consumers are happy to put in the audience labor of training the algorithm and do it unknowingly (Carah and Angus, 2018). I found that many consumers are acutely aware of this labor and feel it shouldn't be their job. Additionally, I showed that to train the algorithm, a level of algorithmic familiarity is required, and consequently, many consumers lack the ability to train it effectively.

5. 3 Managerial Implications

For developers and marketers, this study provides several sources of value. I demonstrated that consumers are aware of algorithms and can influence them in meaningful ways. This information is valuable for marketers and is particularly useful for social media developers who can use these results to advance their recommendation systems to meet consumer needs better. Specifically, the user experience of algorithms should be addressed. While highly knowledgeable users strategically interact with algorithms, I found that many consumers would prefer more explicit opportunities to personalize their feeds. These could be provided by offering the ability to upvote or downvote content and accounts like Pandora and Tik Tok offer. Additionally, platforms could allow users to create multiple explore pages tailored to different interests. By involving users in the algorithmic process in a more legitimate way, developers can gain trust with consumers, increasing the profitability of targeted recommendations.

This study also provides insights into the most common algorithmic training strategies and highlights that familiarity and willingness affect consumer interactions with algorithms. It is interesting to note that social media platforms and brands expect and encourage users to train the algorithm. However, the findings show that companies should reconsider this expectation or develop more effective techniques to enhance consumers' willingness to participate in this labor. For example, as suggested in the first point, giving consumers more direct ways of influencing the algorithm would likely increase their willingness to train. Another interesting idea would be for platforms to offer a fee-based version of the app. By paying a subscription fee, a user would forfeit advertising and be given more chances for explicit control. Companies such as YouTube, Spotify, and Pandora have shown that memberships like this can be advantageous for consumers.

Finally, firms must consider their consumer base. For fashion brands, the results of this study indicate that high fashion consumers are likely to respond poorly to advertising, viewing it as a devaluation of the products shown. Therefore, increased effort could be placed on strategic social media growth instead of paid promotions. Marketers should be particularly mindful that algorithms have flaws and consumers are highly skilled at spotting misalignments. Furthermore, while some consumers are capable of training algorithms and enjoy the recommendations, others are more skeptical and tend to stay clear of the trends pushed by algorithms. Therefore, marketers should refrain from relying too heavily on these systems as the relationship between consumers and algorithms is more nuanced than previously believed.

6. Conclusion

6. 1 Limitations

Due to the qualitative approach of this study, certain limitations apply to the findings. Specifically, the analysis was subject to my interpretations of the data. Hence, my personal experiences and knowledge may have influenced the results. To mitigate the risk of misunderstanding the data, I recorded, transcribed verbatim, and read through the interviews several times to ensure objectivity.

The demographics of the participants also set research limitations. All of the participants were women, and as such, the findings are limited to this gender. Additionally, because the participants are in their 20's-30's, the results are associated with this age group and cannot be transferred to others. Indeed, algorithmic familiarity, which I found to be an essential factor of this study, can vary significantly by user age groups. All of the participants have university degrees in fashion, live in urban environments, and while participants represent several nationalities, the majority are American. Hence, the study has cultural and national limitations. Additionally, with my participants all being recent University students, it is likely that they don't have the spending power that older demographics would, affecting their consumption habits.

In addition to the limitations above, I was unable to host the interviews in person. However, as mentioned in the methodology, Zoom is a suitable and sometimes better alternative to in-person interviewing (Given, 2008). Zoom allowed me to interview participants from different locations, save recordings and videos of the discussion, and watch their Instagram habits through a shared screen.

The findings are also closely tied to Instagram as the context of the study. The way consumers interact with the algorithm on Instagram is likely significantly different from other platforms such as Facebook, Tik Tok, Twitter, or Pinterest. I found that the user category plays a major role in algorithmic manipulation, and it is likely that consumers have different reasons for using each platform. In contrast to other social media platforms, Instagram is heavily visual and photography-based, making it a suitable platform for inspiration and socialization. So, consumers likely interact with content differently on Instagram than they would on other social media platforms. Finally,

each social media algorithm operates differently. So, the findings of this study should not be generalized concerning other platforms, although this study was not conducted to find generalizable results. Instead, being phenomenological research, the purpose was to form a deep understanding of the informant's experiences as fashion consumers who use Instagram.

6. 2 Directions For Future Research

This study shed light on the relationship between consumers and algorithms by uncovering how consumers perceive and use algorithms in their fashion field maneuvering through the context of Instagram. However, further research should be conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. It would be interesting to study consumer perceptions of how well each manipulation strategy works. This would help to deepen my findings on the way consumers interact with algorithms. Additionally, quantitative measures could be applied to study whether some methods are more successful than others for training the algorithm.

Moreover, it could be valuable to study how a consumer's experience with one algorithm affects their experience with another. For example, in my study, I found that a negative experience with Instagram's algorithm meant consumers might think more highly of recommendations on other platforms such as Pinterest. It would be interesting to uncover more correlations and find if consumers who manipulate the Instagram algorithm train different algorithms similarly. This research could bring new insights to understanding how consumers use algorithms to guide their consumption choices.

Next, it is important to acknowledge that targeted advertising is likely to perform differently as privacy laws change. These changes might cause consumers to react differently to advertising and algorithms. For example, Apple recently announced that its most recent update will enable users to opt-out of apps sharing their data with third parties (Heilweil, 2021). This means that when users opt out, algorithmic targeting will likely become less successful. Therefore, how will opting out affect the relationship between consumers and algorithms - will they trust recommendations less or become more intentional with their algorithm interactions?

For broader knowledge of the phenomenon concerning fashion consumers, it would be fascinating to perform a study comparing the relationship of luxury consumers versus high street consumers to the algorithm. While my research looked into cultural and social capital in relation to algorithmic interaction, studying two opposing consumer groups may shed light on how consumers use the algorithm concerning economic capital. Furthermore, it would be interesting to find if all fashion consumer segments use the algorithm for field maneuvering or if it's primarily done by a particular segment. Another study along these lines would be to compare fashion consumers with high levels of capital versus those with lower capital to further understand how one's fashion capital plays a role in their ability to use the algorithm for field maneuvering.

Lastly, limitations of the study suggest researching the topic in other contexts. Although Instagram provided a fascinating context to study the relationship between consumers and algorithms, it would be beneficial to explore this topic on other platforms such as Tik Tok or Pinterest, both referenced by participants in my study. These platforms may serve different uses for consumers, therefore affecting interactions and perceptions of recommendations. Moreover, the limitations related to demographics suggest that a similar study with another gender, age, or cultural context may provide a richer perception of the phenomenon.

6. 3 Key Points

Algorithms have predominately been celebrated as a holy grail for marketers, allowing brands to reach a targeted audience easily. Literature has focused on topics such as how brands can use algorithms to their advantage or the creation of algorithmic brand cultures. However, less is known about the way consumers experience algorithms. Therefore, this research aimed to gain an understanding of the relationship between consumers and algorithms. Specifically, the study focused on the highly competitive field of fashion consumption and used Instagram as a context through which consumer interactions with the algorithm were studied. The results enhance the current understanding of algorithm interaction by showing that consumers are acutely aware of Instagram's algorithm. Notably, I showed that knowledgeable consumers strategically interact with the algorithm, enabling it to perform as a consumption tool. While the novel findings of this study opened a dialogue for consumer-algorithm relationships, continuing this line of research is increasingly vital for marketers as the influence of algorithms on consumption heightens.

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